

Torah Table Talk

Why Jacob was Afraid

Parshat Vayishlach

Genesis Chapter 32:4 – 36:43



After twenty years in the land of Haran, Jacob finally decides to return home so that he can confront his brother and see his parents. More important, Jacob is now prepared to confront himself and face his own inner demons. As he prepares for this fateful encounter with Esau, our forefather does several things: he sends gifts to his brother, he divides his clan in half so that there will be survivors even if they are attacked, and he offers a heartfelt prayer in which he honestly assesses his own life. Jacob sounds very different from the young man who bargains with God in Parshat Vayetze as he flees from his father's house. Still, Jacob is fearful about how his brother, Esau, may respond to his return.

Genesis 32:7-9

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother, to Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him. Jacob was greatly frightened and he was anxious; he divided the people with him and the flocks and herds and camels into two camps thinking, "If Esau comes to one camp and attacks it the other may yet escape."

1. The Torah says that Jacob was both fearful and anxious. What is the difference between these two terms? Is it possible to be anxious and not fearful, or fearful and not anxious? Why does the Torah use both expressions?
2. The messengers do not anticipate why Esau is coming with four hundred men? Is there any reason to assume that Esau means Jacob harm? Is there anything about these verses that might lead us to assume otherwise?
3. The commentators were curious about the double language of the verse: Jacob is both frightened and anxious. Here are four different interpretations from the classical commentators on the Torah.

Rabbi David Kimchi "Jacob was frightened...anxious:" The double language in different words is meant to imply the intensity of his fear.

Rashi "Jacob was frightened...anxious:" He was frightened that he might be killed (by Esau) and he was anxious that he might have to kill others (in defense of himself and his family).

1. Who is closer to the literal meaning of this verse, Rashi or Kimchi? On what basis did you conclude this?
2. What do you think was going through Jacob's mind as he was planning to meet his brother for the first time in twenty years? How do you think Jacob felt about his own personal experiences over this period of time?
3. Do you think Jacob considered himself a success or a failure in life?

Hizkuni: After Jacob was greeted by the angels upon his return that came to accompany him and to watch over him (See Genesis 32:2), why was he afraid of Esau? Rather the angels that met him were Michael, his guardian angel, and Samael, Esau's guardian angel. Because of this Jacob was fearful – just as Michael had come to help him, Samael had come to help Esau; therefore, “Jacob was greatly frightened.” And even though he had sent gifts as appeasements he was fearful lest his sins cause him to be handed over to his brother. Jacob had been in Laban's household twenty years and had not honored his father and mother. He realized that Esau's intentions were not completely bad.

1. At first glance why should the angels that greeted Jacob have assuaged his fear?
2. If we are not quite so literal about Hizkuni's interpretation, what did the two angels who greet him when he arrives in the land of Canaan symbolize? How do they anticipate the upcoming wrestling match which Jacob will participate in?
3. What failings did Jacob attribute to himself? How might this have helped Jacob to see Esau in a more positive light?

Rabbi Shlomo Ben Meir

“And he was greatly frightened:” in his heart. Even though it was obvious to the emissaries that Esau intended to treat Jacob respectfully, Jacob did not believe that Esau had good intentions.

1. Rabbi Shlomo ben Meir offers a very different type of interpretation of Jacob's fear and anxiety than the other commentators. According to this commentator is Jacob's fear motivated by inner or outer circumstances? What does he base this interpretation on?
2. How often is your own fear and anxiety more ‘in your mind’ than based on the real circumstances that you are facing? How do you respond to such feelings?
3. What is the best way to deal with anxiety?

Glossary:

Rabbi David Kimchi: Better known as the Radak; a grammarian and Bible Scholar who lived from 1160 – 1235 in France.

Rabbi Shlomo ben Meir: The Rashbam; a French Bible commentator and the grandson of Rashi who lived from 1194 – 1270.

Hizkuni: Hezekiah ben Manoah; a French bible scholar who lived in the middle of the thirteenth century.

Rashi: Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac; Bible and Talmud commentator in France 1040 – 1105.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***